Religions of South Asia 7 (2013) 300-302
doi:10.1558/rosa.v7i1-3.300
ISSN (print) 1751-2689
ISSN (online) 1751-2697

Review

Samina Awan, *Political Islam in Colonial Punjab Majlis-i-Ahrar 1929-1949.* Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010. xxxvi + 190 pp. Rs 625. ISBN 978-019-906011-5 (hardback).

Reviewed by: Hugh Beattie, The Open University in the East of England. Hugh.Beattie@open.ac.uk

Political Islam in Colonial Punjab Majlis-i-Ahrar 1929–1949 is the first full-length study in English of the Ahrar, the All-India Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam (assembly or council of free men of Islam) to give it its full name, a movement with some distinctive and interesting features which played a significant role in north Indian politics in the decades before partition.

A lengthy scene-setting introduction surveys the reactions of north Indian, particularly Punjabi, Muslims to British rule in the subcontinent. Chapter 1 reviews the Raj's socio-economic impact in the Punjab, before discussing the Ahrar's origins. Founded late in 1929, it was one of several parties which developed from the Khilafat movement, created by Indian Muslims to support the defeated Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI. Awan informs us that it was a mainly urban party, whose leaders were mostly lawyers and journalists, though *ulama*, often with Deobandi connections, played a role too; its supporters mostly came from the middle and lower-middle classes and included small shopkeepers and artisans. Influenced by socialist and nationalist as well as Islamist ideas, it called for Indian independence, economic and social justice for all, and while opposed to Muslim separatism, 'freedom [for Muslims] to live according to the Sharia' (p. 15).

Chapter 2 deals with the campaigns the Ahrar launched in 1931–1933 in the princely states of Jammu and Kashmir, and Alwar, ruled by Hindu dynasties, and Kapurthala, whose ruler was Sikh. In 1930 the Ahrar leaders had decided to take part in the Civil Disobedience Movement launched by the Indian National Congress, and in their campaigns unarmed Ahrar volunteers courted arrest by illegally crossing the borders into these princely states. The Kashmir protest in particular was on a large scale, and some 35,000 volunteers were arrested and held for a time in concentration camps where they were often harshly treated, even tortured.

The Ahrar's involvement in social issues, including its condemnation of drinking alcohol and smoking, dowries, and untouchability, and the welfare work it engaged in at several points in its career, are discussed in Chapter 3.

It was strongly opposed to the Ahmadiya movement, founded in the Punjab in the later nineteenth century, because of the latter's views on the prophetic status of their founder, and its anti-Ahmadiya activities are explored here too. In this chapter Awan also draws attention to what appears to have been a serious political miscalculation. In 1935 Sikhs demolished a disused mosque on a site in Lahore (Shahidganj) they had occupied since the eighteenth century, provoking vigorous Muslim protest. Because of its Congress links, the Ahrar did not give this much if any support, and as a result lost much of its following.

Chapter 4 looks at the way that, as well as engaging in civil disobedience, the Ahrar took part in elections for the provincial and central legislatures during the 1930s, for example winning three seats in the Punjab Assembly in 1933, and two in the Central Legislative Assembly the following year. The Ahrar members played quite an active role in these, for instance raising concerns about the treatment of political prisoners. As Awan explains, towards the end of the decade the Ahrar was still able to mount another substantial extra-parliamentary agitation, this time against British efforts to recruit men for army service. Again thousands of Ahrar volunteers were arrested for taking part; some of the leaders were jailed too, sometimes for long periods. During the 1940s the Ahrar continued to oppose partition, and trying to counter the growing appeal of the Pakistan movement, began to advocate the *hukumat-i-ilahiya* ('kingdom of God'), a 'system of government according to Islamic teachings' (p. 95 n. 62). Before independence the party divided into Indian and Pakistani sections, and a new All-Pakistan Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam was founded in 1949.

Chapter 5 discusses the Ahrar's material culture, organization and activities. Its volunteer cadres usually carried axes, wore khaki *shalwar* and red shirts, and often drilled to the accompaniment of a full band playing martial tunes. It also tried, without much success, to publish its own newspapers in Urdu. In some respects, as Awan explains, insofar as it drew on western ideas and models as well as Islamic ones, and tried to use modern means of communication, it was a modern movement. In other ways it was more traditional. For example, it revolved around personalities, and mosques tended to be the centres of activities.

Political Islam in Colonial Punjab explores some hitherto neglected aspects of the Ahrar's activities, and adds to our understanding of the complex relationships between religion, class, nationalism, rural-urban divisions, and the state in twentieth-century British India. It would have benefited, however, from more searching and systematic treatment of some issues, non-violence for instance, given that its volunteers often mounted long processions with uniformed volunteers and 'cavalry carrying swords and hatchets' (p. 151). Nor was there much discussion of its ideology, for instance of *hukumat-i-ilahiya*, a concept that it may have borrowed from the founder of the Jamiat-i-Islami, Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi. Although there are some brief references to contempo-

rary groups like the Hindu RSS and the Sikh SGPC, more extended comparative discussion which included reference to other Muslim movements could have been rewarding.

Political Islam in Colonial Punjab is not always easy to follow. Quite often points are repeated within a few pages. For example we are told on p. 43 and then again on p. 46 that the Ahrar held its first public meeting on Kashmir in August 1931. Here and there what appear to be inconsistencies in the argument emerge. For instance, although the Ahrar took part on the Sunni side in a confrontation between Sunnis and Shias in Lucknow in 1936, Awan says that it was not anti-Shia. There is also some confusion of fact. At one point, (p. 37) for instance, we're told that a few days after a strike on 21 July 1931 the Maharajah of Kashmir's forces slaughtered 23 unarmed Muslim demonstrators. On the next page, however, Awan refers to a demonstration on 13 July at which about 100 people were killed. In fact the only massacre, in which 23 people died, was on 13 July, 1931. More careful proofreading might also have avoided some linguistic awkwardness, for example the reference on p. 37 to an 'infantile Muslim middleclass', or the way 'several' is used at various points as a synonym for 'many'. For these reasons *Political Islam in Colonial Punjab* cannot be unreservedly recommended. Nevertheless, it is a useful addition to the literature, and should not be ignored by anyone interested in political developments, and particularly the links between religion and politics, in northern India from the end of the 1920s to 1947.